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11. The following are brief items of interest compiled by
Embassy Minsk.

International Relations

12. Lukashenko Receives Syrian Baath Party Official

On May 18, Aleksandr Lukashenko told Abdullah al-Ahmar, assistant
secretary general of Syria's governing Arab Socialist Renaissance

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(Baath) Party, that Belarus had good relations with the former
Syrian president, Hafiz al-Assad, and has good relations with his
son and successor, Bashar al-Assad. Mr. Al-Ahmar thanked the
Belarusian leader for the good words about his country's leadership
and told Lukashenko, "We are always happy to be in your country
within the framework of the good relations between our countries."
Mr. al-Ahmar and other officials of the Baath Party arrived in
Minsk on May 17 on a three-day visit at the invitation of the
Communist Party of Belarus (CPB). President Lukashenko visited
Syria in March 1998 and in December 2003.

13. Lukashenko Makes Diplomatic Appointments

On May 16, Aleksandr Lukashenko on Tuesday made several
diplomatic appointments. The appointments include: Valery
Brylev as ambassador to Kyrgyzstan; Vyacheslav Kachanov as
ambassador to Bulgaria; Igor Leshchenya, former foreign policy
adviser to the Presidential Administration, as ambassador to
Israel; Nikolai Patskevich ambassador to Azerbaijan; and Ruslan
Yesin as consul general in Gdansk, Poland. Lukashenko said that
Mr. Leshchenya should focus attention on the Middle East region
and maintain contacts with prominent Belarusian expatriates in
Israel and that Mr. Patsekevich increase bilateral economic
cooperation with Azerbaijan. According to Lukashenko, trade
would be the main criterion for assessing the performance of
the diplomats.

Post-Elections

14. Lukashenko Makes Government Appointments

On May 16, Aleksandr Lukashenko made several appointments to the
new government. He appointed Aleksandr Ageyev, former Minister of
Energy, as Deputy Chairman of the State Control Committee; Valentin
Rybakov, former DCM in Washington, as a presidential aide; Viktor
Krashevsky as chief of the Main Reconnaissance Department and
Deputy Head of the Armed Forces' General Staff; Aleksandr Apatsky

as First Deputy Minister of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection; Galina Volchuga as Deputy Minister of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection; Valery Kazakevich as Chief of the Council of Ministers' Secretariat; Aleksandr Bagel as Chairman of the Glusk District Executive Committee; Nikolai Andrianov as Director General of state-run Belarusian Steel Works.

Civil Society

15. Youth leaders Dashkevich, Finkevich Jailed for 15 days

On May 18, two leaders of an opposition youth group Malady Front, Dmitry Dashkevich and Artur Finkevich, were sentenced to 15 days in jail in Minsk's Moskovsky District Court. The judge found them guilty of "petty hooliganism" under Article 156 of the Administrative Offenses Code after police officers charged that the two had spoken obscenities. Special task police officers arrested Dashkevich and Finkevich as soon as they and other youths arrived at the court to support opposition activist Yuri Radivil who was standing trial. Some 10 people were reportedly apprehended. Dashkevich and Finkevich were taken to the detention center on Okrestina Street where they spent the night. Five days earlier, Dashkevich had been released from jail after serving a 14-day sentence for participation in an opposition demonstration on the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear accident. On May 10, Finkevich was sentenced to two years of restricted freedom for anti-Lukashenko graffiti. On May 18, Radivil was sentenced to three months in jail for alleged violence against a police officer.

16. Valery Levonevsky Released After Serving Two Years

On May 15, opposition activist Valery Levonevsky was released from a correctional facility in Brest region after serving two years in prison. According to Levonevsky, correction officers left him at a railroad station in Grodno in the early morning. Relatives picked him up a few hours later. In September 2004, a district court in Grodno declared Mr. Levonevsky and his associate Aleksandr Vasilyev

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guilty of defaming Lukashenko under Article 368 of the Criminal Code, because of a phrase in a leaflet publicizing a May Day protest which they organized, "Come and say no to someone's holidaying in Austria, skiing there and living well at your expense." Mr. Vasilyev was released under an amnesty on July 7, 2005. Mr. Levonevsky was denied early release.

17. Belarusian Reporter Warned Against Defamation

On May 17, the Minsk City Prosecutor's Office warned Belarusian journalist Irina Khalip against defaming Aleksandr Lukashenko in articles published in Russia's "Novaya Gazeta." According to Ms. Khalip, the prosecutor's office said that her stories may violate the Criminal Code and could warrant a prison term or a "restricted freedom" sentence of up to four years. Khalip stated, "In my opinion, the prosecutorial agency's close attention to me and my stories is evidence that I work well. And I will try not to disappoint them. I will continue working the way I'm doing it now." Khalip is closely connected with Charter 97.

18. Police and BKGB Seize Copies of Pavel Severinets' Book

In the last two weeks, police and the BKGB seized 94 copies of a book by youth opposition leader Pavel Severinets to determine whether it meets with anti-defamatory regulations. The book discusses Belarusian geography and history, including the short-lived Belarusian National Republic, World War II, and the Chernobyl nuclear accident. However, a few chapters reportedly mention the Belarusian Popular Front and Malady Front, an unregistered youth organization. In May 2005, Mr. Severinets and opposition politician, Nikolai Statkevich, were sentenced to three years of restricted freedom for staging a series of unauthorized protests against the official results of the 2004 parliamentary elections and national referendum. The sentences were reduced by one year under an amnesty law.

Economy

¶9. Belarus Seeks Technologies To Reduce Energy Dependence

On May 17, First Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Semashko said that Belarus' primary goal is to develop new technologies to reduce energy dependence and increase consumption efficiency. According to Semashko, Belarus consumes 450 kilograms of oil equivalent per \$1,000 of GDP, while in France and Germany the figure is at 150 kilograms. He said that Belarus' draft state program of energy saving for 2006-2010 requires U.S. \$5.3 billion in investments, including \$2.7 billion for upgrade of energy-generating facilities.

¶10. Minsk to Consider Buying Crude Oil from Azerbaijan

Following a meeting of the Belarusian-Azerbaijani commission for trade and economic cooperation on May 15, Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Kobyakov said that the government of Belarus will consider buying crude oil and petroleum products from Azerbaijan. Kobyakov explained the possible move by noting that while the price of oil has risen, the cost of transportation is decreasing as a percentage of oil prices.

¶11. Minsk Tractor Works Reports 30% Increase in Exports

On May 17, the Minsk Tractor Works (MTZ) posted a 29.6% increase in exports in the first four months of 2006 over the same period in 2005. From January through April the plant exported about USD 190.9 million of products, of which USD 96 million was shipped to Russia, a rise of 51.5%. Exports to other CIS and non-CIS countries reportedly increased by 15.4% and 10.5%, respectively. Since the company was established, MTZ tractors have been delivered to 126 countries, including: Angola, Bosnia, China, Finland, Iceland, Iraq, Ireland, Mexico, Mozambique, Syria and Tadjikistan. MTZ reportedly controls about 10% of the world tractor market and is seeking new markets in Latin America, Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe. MTZ reportedly built 42,156 tractors last year, 22% more than in 2004.

Culture

¶14. Belarus' Culture Ministry Gives The Da Vinci Code Adult Rating

On May 17, the Belarusian culture ministry's censorship commission decided that people aged under 18 should be banned from watching the film The Da Vinci Code. The commission has not yet decided whether to screen the movie in Belarus, but ticket sales for the movie were suspended on May 16. The Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church has strongly condemned the release of The Da Vinci Code, a feature film based on a novel by American author Dan Brown on the grounds that it injures the religious feelings of

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believers.

Quote of the Week

¶15. Alexander Lukashenko offered the following insight regarding democracy and the relationship between local and national governments:

"The main thing in this discussion should be inviolability of the vertical of power from the top to the lowest level, and there should be no `exercises in democracy.' If we destroy this foundation -- and the primary level is the foundation of the vertical of power -- then we could start a game of democracy, self-government and so on."

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